



## With friends like these, who needs enemies?

*Structural discrimination and good intentions in everyday interactions*

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## WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE, WHO NEEDS ENEMIES? *Structural Discrimination and Good Intentions in Danish Everyday Contexts*

### Abstract

In this article, I address structural discrimination, an under-represented area of study in Danish research. In particular, I introduce the concepts of micro-discrimination and benevolent discrimination. These are proposed as two ways of articulating particular and opaque forms of structural racial discrimination, which have become normalised in everyday Danish (and other) contexts. I present and discuss discrimination as it surfaces in data from my empirical studies of discrimination in Nordic (Danish) contexts. These studies underscore how everyday assumptions and norms contribute to discriminatory practices in particular ways. The article, in introducing the terms micro-discrimination and benevolent discrimination, hopes to identify and acknowledge attitudes and behaviours that fall outside the purview of everyday understandings of discrimination and racism. In addition, it is my hope that these terms can be of use with regard to addressing and reducing challenges within anti-discrimination and social exclusion frameworks.

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### Introduction

*'God save us from people who mean well.'*  
*A Suitable Boy, Vikram Seth*

Discrimination and racism are often assumed to result from ill will. This, however, is not always the case. Racial discrimination can also occur inadvertently, for instance, as everyday racism, colour-blind racism as well as normalised and cultural racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Essed 1991; Gullestad 2005; Hervik 2004; Kamali 2009; Kilomba 2013). Despite positive intent, or lack of animosity, discriminatory messages and positions may still negatively impact targets.

My focus in this article is on structural discrimination. This less-studied area of Danish discrimination research refers to discursive and normalised discrimination that informs other, more explicit and particular forms and expressions of discrimination. I suggest that the inclusion of this historically embedded understanding of discrimination can supplement and help to further nuance discussions of racism and discrimination.

In particular, I am interested in subtle, overlooked or difficult-to-identify discrimination. The exclusion under scrutiny here occurs in situations that are not necessarily antagonistic. As such, these

present a paradox in which ordinary, seemingly neutral interactions and everyday exchanges can be conduits of discrimination. As such, even friendly exchanges may, in such instances, incur ostracism. When discrimination remains concealed or occurs in discrete, unintentional ways, it gives rise to a number of challenges, such as the difficulty in identification and acknowledgement of discrimination when it is subtle rather than explicit.

In this article, I identify and define some of these opaque expressions of discrimination. In particular, I present two ways in which structural discrimination is expressed. I define these as micro-discrimination and benevolent discrimination. Micro-discrimination describes discrimination masked within micro-interactions. Benevolent discrimination resides within positive and well-meaning gestures, yet it belies a charitable relational dynamic that rests on powered assumptions about difference informed by colonial dynamics and residue.

I structure the article as follows: I begin with a presentation of my empirical study and methodology. Thereafter follows a discussion of structural discrimination and terminology. Finally, I introduce the concepts of micro-discrimination and benevolent discrimination.

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## Method

This article takes its point of departure in qualitative research conducted in Denmark between 2013 and 2016. The empirical material I draw on here consists of both interviews with racially minoritised Danes as well as reflection papers written by racially minoritised and majoritised Danish university students.

I conducted 18 qualitative, in-depth interviews with racially minoritised Danish university students and graduates in the Copenhagen area. This is a narrow group and, as such, one that provides a limited range of experience. The study, however, was not intended as a comprehensive documentation of discrimination. Rather, it was my hope to gain insight into particular experiences of discrimination within a fairly exclusive group. Subjects were initially recruited from within my own network. Thereafter, subsequent interviewees were referred by the first interviewees, a process also known as snowballing (Atkinson & Flint 2001). My interview subjects were highly educated and ranged in age from their early 20s to their early 40s. They had a wide range of educational backgrounds, from legal studies to business to fine-and-performing arts. After this, they were all asked the same questions. These covered areas such as social and educational experiences growing up and situations in which they felt that their visible difference influenced interactions in their everyday experiences. Most interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, some only recorded and four were reconstructed after technical difficulties.

There were several considerations behind this choice of subjects. First, my research interest was primarily to explore particular ways in which discrimination occurs in everyday experiences. I was keen to understand how discrimination was understood and dealt with by minoritised as well as majoritised people who identify as Danish. With the exception of research on transnational adoption in Denmark (Myong 2009), highly educated, racially minoritised Danes are not widely described in literature on Danish racism and racial discrimination.

It should be noted that I have chosen to work with a simple division between racially minoritised or majoritised subjects in this study. What I mean by this is that I divide people into racialised minority or majority, despite the imprecision of such a notion. People who, e.g., present as white (or non-white) may have complex racial identities that do not match how they are perceived and racialised. They are rarely either majoritised or minoritised, but usually more complexly located. The fact that I study socially privileged individuals further emphasises the complexity of these categories. My choice to use the categories racially minoritised and majoritised reflects the immediate appearance and the social categorisation in response to this. This either/or division erases much individual complexity (as well as the precarious nature of racialising). It also reflects a widespread discriminatory gesture in which Danishness is conflated with whiteness (Gullestad 2004; Jensen 2012). In this study, I do not explore the nuances, paradoxes and complexities of identities embedded in such gestures; therefore, for the sake of clarity, I operate mainly with this binary framework to articulate the issues in focus here.

Second, European racism and discrimination are often explained or excused by deflecting the discussion to questions of integration and cultural/religious difference (Essed 1991; Gullestad 2004; Skadegård 2014). Many have described this tendency, e.g. Bulmer and Solomos (2004), when they explain how '...the new racisms within the past two decades are coded within a cultural logic. As a result, the champions of these racisms can claim that they are protecting their way of life and that the issue of colour or phenotype is irrelevant'. As

such, there may be a tendency to assume that those who are met with racial discrimination are also culturally different. Discrimination can thereby be understood and even legitimised in terms of cultural or religious difference. In the wake of such approaches, narratives of incompatibility with Danish norms and culture arise (Hervik 2004).

Third, challenges involving racialisation risk being framed as what Yilmaz has termed 'the ethnification of social problems' (Yilmaz 1999). In order to avoid this, I wanted to speak with people of colour, who self-identified as Danes, grew up in middle-to-upper middle class Danish contexts and were immersed in a widely shared social frame of reference (language, schooling and social life). In this way, by choosing subjects of colour who identify as Danish, I hope to place skin tone (and religion) as secondary to context. The informants in this study are culturally Danish and socially positioned so as to avoid falling into neo-racist cultural or social explanations for experiences of social exclusion and discrimination (Hervik 2004; Urciuoli 2013; Yilmaz 1999).

In addition to interviews, I also used reflection papers, a method inspired by Trienekens and Essed (2008). I asked students in my master-level classes to write freestyle thoughts and reflections (from their own experiences) at the end of introductory class sessions on discrimination. This was an element of a teaching method used during courses on International Competence Development, Learning in Intercultural Contexts and Corporate Social Responsibility. Classes ranged from 11 students for most courses to some sessions with up to 80 students. Papers were ungraded and anonymized.

Students made it clear that they had not previously had class discussions, nor had they been exposed to any formal teaching, on discrimination until these sessions. The reflection papers were a way for students to privately deliberate, reflect and articulate as they saw fit in relation to the issues brought up in class. Although all of the students were required to deliver a reflection paper as part of the course work, they had the choice to allow the papers to be used for research. All students, without exception, gave permission.

All papers were anonymised. This meant that whether and how the author was racially minoritised or majoritised was not always apparent, and similarly, other identity parameters were not always delineated. Structural discrimination, as discussed later, is not limited to particular racialised positions. It is discernible within dominant and shared norms and in ordinary, everyday expressions and actions that can be expressed from minority as well as majority positions.

The empirical material was organised along themes as patterns emerged. These were identified in the form of key narratives and statements wherein subjects described similar experiences in regard to dilemmas such as a dissonance between discrimination and its denial, in descriptions of friendly interactions in which discriminatory messages were inferred or embedded and in descriptions of interchanges in which discriminatory assumptions or beliefs were shrouded within everyday language and practices.

My point of departure for the analysis (interviews and reflection papers) positions individual experience within a presumption that equal treatment and non-discrimination are expectations or shared norms. I also assume that these norms are challenged in individual experience. To explore this, I try to understand how broader social (macro) dynamics are inscribed in micro-processes and practices, which are (re)shaped in local contexts such as within described interactions with friends and peers, in educational settings and within families and other familiar spaces. As such, when scrutinising how individuals experience – and navigate in relation to – discrimination, subtle and underlying (and often-unintended) discrimination emerges, alongside categories of recognised or acknowledged discrimination.

In this social and discursive space, articulations of different implicit and explicit forms of discrimination arise.

In this course of research, two forms of structural discrimination, which I call benevolent discrimination and micro-discrimination, become apparent. These are subtle and underlying forms that are often simultaneously denied (or excused; interpreted as misunderstanding). These forms of discrimination often occur within friendly or non-antagonistic interactions.

## What Is Structural Discrimination, Exactly...?

Interest in discrimination and racism in the Nordic countries has gained ground over recent years (Andreassen & Rabo 2014; Danbolt & Raun 2008; Gullestad 2005; Hervik 2004; Justesen 2003; Keskinen 2012; Myong 2009; Rasmussen 2011; Reyes & Kamali 2005). Despite this, explorations of structural discrimination remain under-represented. Structural discrimination can be thought of as a broad or meta form of discrimination that is expressed within, or informs, tacit norms and understandings. As such, it underlies many types of explicit and implicit discrimination. Kamali (2009:6) describes how structural discrimination '...legitimises and normalises indirect forms of negative treatment of the "Others" and makes it a part of everyday normal life of society'.

My perspective is inspired by and converges with, among others, Essed's (1991) notion of everyday racism, Kilomba's (2013) notion of structural discrimination as a privileging of whiteness which puts minorities at disadvantage and Sue's (2010) development of racial microaggressions. All of these concern how what I call structural discrimination is echoed in practices and interactions. In other words, overt and covert discrimination emerge from shared discriminatory structures, norms, traditions and ways of thinking and understanding.

Further, my use of the term draws on legal and social studies (Hill 1988; Kamali 2009; Pincus 1996), studies of structural and institutional discrimination and racism (SLR 1999; Reyes & Kamali 2005), as well as critical race theory (Crenshaw 1991; Delgado & Stefancic 1992). The term includes all the recognised discrimination grounds specified within the Declaration of Human Rights and its covenants (Justesen 2003; Meron 1985; Olsen, Zarrehparvar, & Krusaa 2007; Skadegård 2014). As such, it is a comprehensive, intersectional understanding that embraces identity parameters that merge within expressions of discrimination. Notwithstanding this, and as discussed further, in this study, structural discrimination is used here primarily in regard to racialised difference.<sup>1</sup>

## Discrimination or Racism?

A distinction that should briefly be addressed here is my use of the term discrimination rather than racism and other related terms. This choice reflects several considerations. One of these is that discrimination refers to all internationally recognised discrimination grounds. The grounds are distinguished by way of their particular histories of oppressions and how these histories have influenced access and freedoms of affected groups in societies around the world (Justesen 2003; Meron 1985; Olsen, Zarrehparvar, Krusaa 2007). As such, discrimination embraces a complex of oppressed positions (and their intersections).

My main concern, however, in using discrimination rather than racism is to avoid a conflation of terms. Hooks, among others, has argued convincingly about the importance of accurately naming

forms of discrimination and oppression in order to address and resist those (Hooks 2009). In accordance with this, I find that using racism and discrimination synonymously risks fudging distinctions between racism as ideological (which falls under freedom of thought) on the one hand and discrimination as an action with an impact, which is governable, e.g. through legal measures, on the other hand (Justesen 2003). This distinction has its point of departure in the international human rights framework, which provides a normative, international understanding of discrimination. I see this distinction as useful in my aim for more precise identification (and resistance) of opaque and underlying forms of discrimination.

Additionally, because discrimination is an action or doing that negatively impacts targets, by looking at what happens (discrimination) rather than whether or not there is a racist intention, e.g., I hope to move focus towards identifying and naming the discrimination itself. I am interested in identifying how discrimination is enacted and how macro processes are inscribed in everyday actions, in other words, on what might be called a grey zone. By this, I mean a space that encompasses or describes micro-processes and interactions, or a micro-level, in which discrimination is enacted. It is in this space that there is a need to address and name forms of discrimination that remain difficult to identify, recognise and, most importantly, address.

In the following sections of this article, I identify and discuss two forms of structural discrimination in the empirical material, which I call micro-discrimination and benevolent discrimination.

## Discrimination Seeps into Everyday Norms

Our marshmallow-puffs were called Negro-puffs for many years. Or Samba-puffs. A lot of kids still call them Negro-puffs and not marshmallow-puffs because their parents still call them that. What does that mean for our kids when we do that? Do the kids know what that means? For example, I didn't know how a black Norwegian guy felt about the word until I said it and he said: 'Lina, this is how it is, and so on. Have you thought about that?' And I said 'No, I haven't.' I mean of course I knew it was a negative word and that I shouldn't use it, but I never thought I could set someone's feelings off like that, or that it could make someone feel, y'know... less valued. (Lina)

In this interview excerpt, Lina explains that she knows the N-word (Negro) is somehow negative, it is also normalised by daily use because their parents still use this term. Words and concepts are used without (perhaps) considering their meaning and the consequences such language can have. She says that she does not fully understand what such language infers and how it *set someone's feelings off like that*, or that it could *make someone feel, y'know... less valued*, until she is confronted and a target of such racialised terminology explains it to her. Interestingly, Lina herself is also racially minoritised. Despite this, she uses the term until she is taught otherwise. As such, this suggests that discriminatory structures are part of a shared frame of reference and uninterrogated norms, regardless of individual positions. As Gullestad (2005), among others, has discussed, this type of everyday racism resides in language and daily practices, reproducing discriminatory injury and naturalised perceptions of racial otherness when such language is used. In this way, structural discrimination enables witting and unwitting complicity and participation in discriminatory patterns.

Mogens describes a similar gesture in his reflection paper. Embedded notions of otherness seep into his assumptions about

racially minoritised persons in the following narrative. As depicted in the following passage, such underlying norms and perspectives influence his judgement and make him complicit in racially discriminatory assumptions.

After a training session in my club I noticed my telephone was missing. My first instinct was that if anyone from the club had taken it, it was probably Mansour. Later on I wondered just why I had assumed it was him (we actually have a good relationship). I arrived at the conclusion that, in addition to his economic situation (which I assume is not great, judging from my knowledge of his situation); it also had to do with being imprinted with general assumptions about folks with darker body markers and their willingness to appropriate other's property. By the way, I found my phone on my desk when I got home. (Mogens)

Research on implicit bias, stereotypes and prejudice has illustrated how historical, underlying and implicit knowledge influences behaviour in such ways that '(...)' come to influence perception and behavior – even when people do not personally endorse them and are motivated to be racially egalitarian' (Goff *et al.* 2008: 305). Others show how the mere presence of minorities activates unconscious discriminatory responses (Dovidio, Kawakami & Gaertner 2002). This has also been shown to occur in Danish contexts (Hervik 2004).

Mogens's story shows how, on the one hand, he responds reflexively, assuming that Mansour is the culprit. At the same time, he is aware that something is not quite right. Upon reflection, he explains that his unfair (albeit private) accusation rests on underlying, shared assumptions. He catches himself in an act of unwitting discrimination. The smiley he has placed at the end of his story suggests both a sense of irony and awareness of his folly, as well as perhaps pleasure at being able to catch himself in the act. It could also infer embarrassment or sheepishness at his reaction. Regardless, being able to catch the discriminatory reflex and reflect on it in this way illustrates well how discrimination can be deeply ingrained as well as not necessarily intentional.

Mogens's reflections on this experience suggest that he does not wish to behave in a racially discriminatory fashion. As such, he exemplifies a paradox, or conflict between discriminatory behaviour and a desire not to discriminate, which has been described, among other places, in Sue's (2010) work on microaggressions.

Sue discusses how racial discrimination resides within gestures and interactions and, as such, is hidden just under the surface, in assumptions and inferences that draw on shared norms. In the same way, Mogens discriminates without meaning to do so. Similar to Lina, he is caught unawares, so to speak, within norms and structures. He implies that his response is not an active choice, but a reflex, a mirroring of everyday norms – enacting acceptable or ordinary practice. His reflexive action mirrors structural discrimination as constitutive or productive in its influence on (not necessarily conscious) action.

When he thinks about the incident in retrospect, he sees the way in which he unwittingly or passively incorporates discriminatory assumptions in his own actions. This suggests, perhaps, the need for more active assessment of reflexive actions in the pursuit of anti-discriminatory practice. As has been discussed in critical race and microaggression theory (Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Rowe 1990; Sue 2010), discrimination informs and influences everyday practice. Such implicit and underlying exclusion is neither direct nor easily identifiable. It is naturalised, occurring in a number of non-tangible ways. In such cases, a notion of structural discrimination provides a

way to identify and address what is otherwise difficult to put a finger on. It is a framework to understand the normalisation of discriminatory perspectives, for instance as what I define as micro-discrimination in the following section.

## Micro-discrimination

While much discrimination occurs in ways mirrored in the earlier narratives, it remains a common misperception that most discrimination is explicit, intentional and readily identified. This is one of the most important findings in the game-changing Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (SLR 1999). This UK inquiry, commissioned in connection with a marred police investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, has had immense import in terms of identifying, recognising and acknowledging underlying and institutional racism and discrimination both in the UK and well beyond its borders. Furthermore, it has had a profound impact on legislation on racism and discrimination, as well as on race relations within the UK. It describes what it calls unwitting racism as racism that

...can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs. It can arise from well-intentioned but patronizing words or actions. It can arise from unfamiliarity with the behavior or cultural traditions of people or families from minority ethnic communities. It can arise from racist stereotyping of black people as potential criminals or troublemakers. Often this arises out of uncritical self-understanding born out of an inflexible police ethos of the 'traditional' way of doing things. Furthermore such attitudes can thrive in a tightly knit community, so that there can be a collective failure to detect and to outlaw this breed of racism. The police canteen can too easily be its breeding ground (SLR 1999: 40).

In practice, as in Mogens's and Lina's examples (and as the SLR describes), much discrimination occurs unwittingly and without fanfare. Lina explains as follows:

...it's like those small things you experience, I don't think people mean it negatively, but somewhere or the other, under their surface, it's there. (...) You aren't equal, you feel that some times. You notice it in those little things.

As Lina says, it transpires implicitly, often underlying interactions with hidden or opaque messages (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Dovidio, Kawakami & Gaertner 2002; Essed 1991; Skadegård 2016).

Those targeted by discrimination are often challenged in the context of their resources and access and therefore are less easily able to resist or redress the discrimination they may experience. While this, of course, happens in explicit ways, such as organisational barriers in terms of jobs or promotions on the basis of race, gender-based wage differences, lack of representation in film, media or boardrooms, or other more explicit or institutional exclusion, discrimination also occurs discretely. A common way in which this happens is as naturalised beliefs, or what Rowe (1990) calls micro-inequities. This has also been defined in literature as microaggressions (Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Sue 2010). I argue, however, that micro-discrimination is a more precise term for this type of underlying and implicit discrimination, as I elaborate in the following text.

To this day, when I tell someone that I am Danish, the normal reaction is 'But where are you originally from? Are you adopted?'



Where are your parents from?' And even though questions like these have become normal for me, and even though I know that the people asking are just curious, it reminds me continuously that I am apparently not really Danish, even though I've never been anything but a Danish citizen!! (Jane)

As Jane suggests in her reflection paper, micro-discrimination is discrimination expressed in ways that lie just below the surface. The term is inspired by and encompasses the notion of microaggressions but refers specifically to the discrimination grounds. As such, micro-discrimination is limited to, or refers to, the international discrimination framework. This specificity is intended in order to avoid conflation with other aggressions or forms of behaviour that may not necessarily be encompassed within discrimination.

Micro-discrimination can occur by way of normalised daily perceptions, such as assumptions about racialised belonging. In the earlier excerpt from her reflection paper, Jane describes being routinely refused her Danishness. Her answer is simply not accepted. Despite her own identification as Danish, she is still expected to explain herself. Her non-white appearance is seen as a contrast to Danishness rather than a possible Danishness. Such exchanges, which are described by all non-white Danes in the study, serve to emphasise and maintain the difference and shared notions of authentic belonging. Jane is addressed as though she is less entitled to define herself as Danish than if she had been racialised as a part of the white majority. As Jane says, it reminds [her] continuously that [she is] apparently not really Danish.

Such a contestation of identity draws on a widely shared assumption about Danishness as connected to whiteness (Andreassen 2005; Myong 2009; Skadegård 2014). This small interaction is an arena in which a larger dynamic of racial discrimination is played out. This has also been described in other European contexts, which suggests a shared dynamic in regard to constructions of whiteness (Rastas 2005). It further suggests a position of normative authority, or what Spivak (1990) describes as sovereign subject, which legitimises rejecting Jane's self-identification as a Dane, from a position claiming the authority to know better about real Danishness (knowing that Danishness is equivalent with whiteness). Mogens' expectation that minoritised persons are potentially more criminal is also an example of micro-discrimination. The assumption draws on shared beliefs about whiteness, cloaked in discourses of ethnic difference, as has been described in Danish media research (Andreassen 2005; Yilmaz 1999).

It is often more difficult to address micro-discrimination in seemingly minor everyday interactions, in which assumptions and expectations around difference engender discomfort, for instance, in the following interview excerpt:

But then, after I'd been there for like a month or something, we are sitting at the table with the secretaries and eating, and one secretary says to me, while all the lawyers are sitting around the table and eating, Sandra, it's funny, I've noticed you never eat the meat here, is that because you are Muslim...? So there it was, y'know? And I was like, so it all happens super quick in my head, where I think: first I thought: You did not just ask me that right now, here?! That is, like, way out of proportion! And, how is it your business what I eat?! I mean, that is wild, if you hadn't eaten tomatoes I would maybe have thought ok, so you don't like tomatoes, and whatever, that's your thing. I mean it's a buffet, eat what you want. So I look at her, and there are all these things going on in my head at once: Should I just act like I

don't eat meat? That would be a lie, and I don't want to do that, I don't want to lie. Or should I look at her and tell her she's out of line? And how can I do that without killing the mood – because people will be like 'uh oh, we sure pressed the wrong button. She got pissed...' That would be so awkward. So I looked at her and said 'Naah', and then I said, 'But tell me, are you keeping an eye on what I eat?' So then she was the one who was embarrassed, which I love because then I think 'Good, you do have a bit of a conscience, and you do actually know what you can and can't ask folk.' So then she said that it wasn't that she was keeping an eye on what I eat, she had just noticed it. But then she must have been keeping an eye, y'know? So I was like 'no problem, don't worry about it, you're just asking'. (Sandra)

This incident illustrates some elements and challenges that arise within micro-discrimination. For example, while the secretary's question may seem neutral, it communicates a particular perspective. Sandra's appearance triggers a number of seemingly reflexive assumptions. Similar to the earlier scenario wherein Jane's identity is directly contested, Sandra is also asked to explain herself, though the inference is a bit more subtle. In each instance, it seems that Sandra's and Jane's appearances spark a response. This can be read as a form of disruption by the non-white body, an issue that has been discussed in feminist and race theory. In an essay about happiness and affectivity, Ahmed (2010), drawing on Lorde and Hooks, among others, describes how the black female body engenders a discomfort by its mere presence in white feminist contexts. It seems that both Jane and Sandra affect their contexts similarly, and both must navigate against this framework. Jane responds without protest or resistance, which in Ahmed's terms could be interpreted as acquiescing to oppression. Sandra, however, opts for an interesting way out, not quite as killjoy, but as something else. Prior to this incident, Sandra had not mentioned her religious background at work. This personal boundary is overstepped, or ignored, much like Jane's own identification with Danishness. A power inequity is exposed where Sandra as the perceived other is expected to provide an explanation or divulge personal information in order to quell the secretary's curiosity. Sandra's discomfort appears to arise from an awareness of how she is constructed from a dominant perspective. As in Fanon's (1967) description of being fixed or framed by the white gaze, Sandra is caught in a (violent) grip. Her body is assumed to be a fair target (and object) of purview and questioning. Her constructed difference is (over)emphasised when brought to attention while all the lawyers are sitting around the table and eating. Her body engenders certain assumptions and expectations that seem to legitimise a breach of her personal boundaries, something that, she infers, ordinarily would be a transgression of social codes. She is exposed and accosted. Private matters, such as religion and background, are made a public matter by way of a discussion of the food she has chosen from the buffet. The impropriety is subtle and lies in the awareness of what is assumed in the question.

Sandra, a Dane herself, is well aware of how non-white bodies are constructed and interpreted within the Danish context. Power is at play here both in regards to how her identity is perceived to require legitimising and explaining but also in the way that she is positioned in front of her colleagues. Sandra describes how she must think quick to navigate in this framework, 'it all happens super quick in my head'. To think quickly in this situation is possibly to navigate in the awareness of its precariousness. If she is angry or defensive, as Ahmed (2010) describes, she may confirm the perception of angry black body, and if she is acquiescent, she submits to the oppression that underlies

this interchange. She resists the positioning by turning the situation around and taking an upper hand. In a subtle version of killing joy, as Ahmed might say, she resists by way of a twist of power. By calling the secretary out and asking if she is keeping an eye on what she eats, Sandra exposes the impropriety. Discomfort shifts to the secretary. The secretary's embarrassment suggests that she is (or becomes) aware of the social breach. Repositioning also allows Sandra to avoid answering the question and regain some autonomy. In fact, it seems she is now in a situation where she has power, as emphasised by her being able to control and defuse the situation. She excuses the rudeness, saying 'don't worry about it, you're just asking'. This gesture puts Sandra in a position of authority to forgive a trespass of shared societal norms. One could ask whether Sandra would have done the same had it been one of the lawyers, who rank higher in the organisation, rather than the secretary. Clearly more than visible difference is at play here, these are murky waters. Sandra must navigate within the complex framework of gender, class, education, job hierarchy, social codes and her (possible) wish to remain an employee.

As these exchanges illustrate, micro-discrimination is often embedded within seemingly ordinary interactions. It is communicated in everyday practices, phrases or statements, often unwittingly, which expose structures of dominance, exclusion or non-belonging in relation to minorities. As one informant explains in his reflection paper, 'It can happen in any number of ways, like being spoken to in English, which sounds banal, but is such a clear manifestation of being seen as not Danish. You aren't read as Danish, and uh, I see you as foreign, you have less of a right to Danishness' (Thomas). When discrimination occurs in these opaque and often unintentional ways, it becomes particularly difficult to address (Sue 2010). Not everyone has a manoeuvre like Sandra's up their sleeve. Everyday shared notions of discrimination rarely include awareness of these nearly invisible types of discrimination. The language to address or redress, as well as the framework within which to identify it, is often lacking for both target and perpetrator in many Danish contexts. What is worse, however, is that this type of discrimination, because it is opaque and difficult to articulate, is also quite easily and readily denied. While explicit discrimination is something people generally both recognise and prefer to distance themselves from morally, subtle and underlying forms are unlikely to be acknowledged at all (Rowe 1990; Sue 2010). Thus, addressing or contesting such opaque forms of discrimination is even more complicated.

## Benevolent Discrimination – Pity the Victim

Another challenge that arises when discrimination is shrouded in everyday norms is seen within friendly and well-intended behaviour. While discrimination is often assumed to be connected with ill will or intent (Crump 1998–1999), as discussed earlier, this is not always the case. In the following section, I discuss how explicitly well-intended behaviour can also have discriminatory impact.

I think, for example, that because I didn't go to a lot of those social events, that my teacher, uh, he had a kind of different attitude towards me. Uh, like, a relation like, we have to help her, we better save her from her parents and from herself. And that was one of the reasons that I, like I said before, that I had this tough attitude or kept a distance. Because no matter what, you're always loyal to your parents and always loyal to your family, and nobody gets to come from the outside and say: I'm gonna save you from yourself, like... (Sandra)

In this narrative, actions and behaviours that on the surface seem positive and suggest concern – or even kindness – can be inflected with discriminatory dynamics. Sandra's teacher wants to save her from her parents and from herself. Such a desire reflects several things. A desire to assist or rescue someone is generally considered a decent or noble thing. However, in this case, the impulse suggests very particular assumptions about the nature of Sandra's life and family. The underlying expectation is that her religious background is problematic.<sup>2</sup> Her family is assumed to be unable to provide appropriate parenting. Such a presumption may arise from either Sandra's lower participation in certain extracurricular activities or from assumptions about her visible and religious difference, as well as how this may be construed by teachers. She is seen as deprived; as someone refused access to social activities. She must be saved. An asymmetry between minoritised bodies and majority positions is constructed such that the majority (as authoritative, sovereign subjectivity) is framed in terms of access, knowledge and freedom (lenient parenting and pedagogical insight), while minority parenting is constructed in opposition to this. Such assumptions, then, illustrate how a discriminatory gaze can be cloaked beneath, or even provide the impetus for, altruism.

As such, this resonates with historical conduct. That is, saviour discourses such as these, in which Sandra is seen as someone to be rescued, mirror certain colonial practices and structures. For example, narratives of benevolence were employed to condone slavery, religious indoctrination and the destruction of communities, languages, civilisations, skills, livelihoods and much more. These were considered, by dominant (colonising) powers, to be civilising processes. Those subject to such oppressions were perceived as primitive, uncivilised peoples. They were unfortunate/pagan/helpless. Civilising the natives continues to be an undercurrent in contemporary interactions between majoritised (European/white) and minoritised positions. In addition, such modern narratives are often gendered. There is a tendency to see non-white women as particularly in need of rescue from perceived brown male counterparts. This white saviourism is captured in Spivak's (1988) famous adage, 'White men saving brown women from brown men', which aptly describes the gesture of saving that Sandra describes when recounting her teacher's attitude towards her. When Sandra suggests that her teacher shares in such a perspective, she makes explicit a common, perhaps sanctimonious, Danish theme in which the non-white – usually female – child is constructed as a victim.

Lina, another interviewee, describes how similar dynamics emerge during her school's well-intended efforts to accommodate her pork-free diet. She recounts how peers responded to her lunches by expressing pity. Thus, comments such as 'We feel sorry for you' and 'Ooh, you don't know what you are missing, it is so good!' constructed her difference in a discourse of exclusion, lack and denial.

They made me feel like – the group that said it – that I wasn't one of them. I think it was like that a lot until I was like 17 or 18, where I thought a lot about: 'Why are they saying stuff like that?' and 'Lina you can't have a boyfriend because you are a Muslim; geez, how can you even live with that?' It was always about how my religion or culture was the reason I couldn't do this or that. (Lina)

Lina is impacted by the tacit assumptions that surface in such exchanges. Her peers express that they feel sorry for her and see her as missing out and that she does not know what (she) is missing. Lina is constructed as someone who is denied the good things in

life. Her choices and possibilities (food, romantic choices) are a consequence of restrictions and denial. These are problematised and framed as illegitimate. She is interpreted, implicitly, as someone to be pitied. The underlying assumption is that the situation of her peers is decidedly superior to her own. While none of these exchanges are ill-intended or meant to be discriminatory, they do reveal a particular, dominant gaze similar to what Sandra describes in the previous narrative. A benevolent perspective constructs and positions them as less-advantaged, missing out and as victims of unreasonable social (religious) control.

I have always felt the difference. People seem to be expecting me to give them some kind of tabloid story. Like if I said something like 'Yeah, I have been forced to marry my cousin, and I am a fanatic Muslim, and I can't even look at you because you're a boy. It's like they are just waiting to hear that kind of thing, so they can see me as a victim...' (Sandra)

Pity or empathy establishes the choices and lifestyles of Sandra's and Lina's families as subpar. The further assumption is that their peers are not subject to comparable social control or inappropriate parenting. Majority positions are framed in positive terms as having access to more benefits and goods (parties, school trips, sex, romance, and better food). Ethnocentric naturalisation of majority norms as superior situate Sandra and Lina within a benevolent narrative of lack and denial. Sandra and Lina are presumed to be subject to restrictions and social control. They are unfortunate, to be pitied and helped, but not equal.

## Benevolent Discrimination – Don't Look a Gift Horse....

Benevolence is complex and thickly layered with power. While immersed within good intentions and seemingly kind gestures, it infers a particular asymmetry between a (Western) patriarchal, charitable position, what Spivak (1990) calls benevolent subjectivity, directed towards a constructed, racialised other. The beneficiary is identified and defined as having less (or no) access or power (e.g. as being in need) from this empowered and entitled gaze.

The incidents discussed herein suggest that both confrontation and resistance are challenged when discrimination occurs in non-antagonistic ways. In addition to the discomfort of being a killjoy, such discomfort may also be fed by other social codes and conflicting messages. When discrimination is widely believed to be intentional and antagonistic, how then, does the target address or even interpret the friendly or neutral interaction? When benevolence provides kindness or even help, how does a target address a marginalising gaze or negative assumptions and constructions? If, in an interaction where discrimination is veiled within kindness or even help, how does a target resist such benevolent discrimination without trespassing social codes and seeming ungrateful to those one might feel beholden to?

And I remember this always happening in my private school when we were out. And it wasn't because they meant anything bad by it, but it just made one feel different. We just have to make sure Lina gets.... Of course it was considerate and well meant, but it just felt so – because the division happened the way it did. One felt a little like: 'Hmm, well I am the "special" kid'. And I guess you could take it as positive, negative, whatever, but I think I felt a

lot like: I just want to be like everyone else. Why do I have to feel like I'm different? (Lina)

Lina finds herself in a dilemma here. On the one hand, her school attends to her particular needs. On the other, because the division happened the way it did, she finds it uncomfortable. For Lina, the accommodation overemphasises her difference. In the process of framing itself as/behaving as chivalrous, Lina becomes cast as outsider, 'Hmm, well I am the "special" kid.' Lina asks, rhetorically, whether this is necessary. Could the school not have made less of a show and just naturalised the accommodation? I just want to be like everyone else. *Why do I have to feel like I'm different?* She is marginalised by way of a seemingly emphatic accommodation.

This presents a complicating factor. By providing help, assistance and support in a benevolent interaction, the question of one's morality, goodness or intent to do good is made explicit or emphasised. That is to say, the benefactor is elevated within the moral framework of the beneficent behaviour. While this is very much the nature of philanthropy and charity and, as such, nothing new, it does contribute to the complexity and ambiguity of such relations and interchanges. An even more explicit rendition of this dynamic is provided by Jane in a narrative that surfaces in regard to her experience as transnationally adopted.

There was this time, we were on vacation, my sister and I weren't very big. My Mom started chatting with a woman, who asked a few questions about us and stuff. My Mom told her we were adopted, and the woman was like 'God, you are such good people – I mean she said this to my parents. Way out, you know? And then she asked this classic question: 'Do they, like, live in the house?' And that was really... Uhm, like to hear that as a child. I mean, like, yes we live in the house. What did she expect?! (Jane)

Here, Jane's parents are viewed as such good people, while Jane and her sister seem barely to be seen as human. The woman asks their mother whether the children live in the house, which Jane describes as a classic question, suggesting that such inferences are not new to her in the course of such interchanges. Being seen as potentially not-fit-to-live-in-the-house, Jane and her sister seem to be interpreted as stray animals, lucky to be fed and cared for, but not quite human or of equal status. The parents are benevolent, the children lucky. This type of benevolence discourse has been discussed at length in research on transnational adoption in Nordic contexts (Hübinette & Tigervall 2008; Myong 2009).

Benevolent discrimination constructs and maintains an asymmetric relation (Kapoor 2004; Spivak 1999). While benevolent subjectivity frames and defines the other as (per definition) deficient and in need, the benefactor is reified within an authoritative; all-knowing space into which this constructed other can be invited to attain whatever it is seen to be lacking (Spivak 1990). Further, the well-intended (and genuine) benevolent gesture of helping, giving and empowering, among other things, makes it difficult to criticise the benevolent position.

## Perspectives and Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I have looked at how discrimination, embedded in everyday interactions, can be hidden under a cloak of goodness and well-intended gestures. For some who experience discrimination in this way, it is a challenge to contest underlying and implicit



insinuations in a context where the individuals involved may mean no ill. If anything, they may mean well, yet their assumptions rest on discriminatory perspectives. Lina's peers see themselves as having the right food, romance practices and so forth. The underlying expectation is that certain bodies, choices (food and romance) and freedoms (access to parties and school trips) exist within a backdrop of denial and control. A naturalised assumption holds that these racialised bodies are less fortunate, their parents less reasonable. Sandra is positioned as oppressed. Jane and her sister are beholden to parents who have saved them from an unknown, clearly deficient, fate. In these cases, challenging, addressing or rejecting discrimination becomes a dilemma fraught with discomfort. The recipient of this kindness (whether welcome or not) is placed in a position where they must navigate on tricky ground.

To discuss how such discrimination occurs, I have used structural discrimination as an overarching concept. I have also presented the terms micro-discrimination and benevolent discrimination as ways to access some of the dynamics in question. Micro-discrimination, which is closely connected to the notion of microaggressions, is subtle, underlying discrimination that occurs within everyday gestures of ordinary interaction. It refers only to discrimination and not to the wider notion of aggression. By using this concept, discrimination that is opaque or underlying can, potentially, be more readily identified and demarcated, e.g. when it occurs in seemingly friendly interchanges like benevolent discrimination.

The notion of benevolent discrimination, inspired by postcolonial theorist Spivak, is understood as a patriarchal and charitable attitude that constructs and maintains the 'other' from this perspective. This subjectivity seeks to bring the non-white non-Western other into its own (rational and right) understanding of the world, so to speak. The dynamic is framed as a form of giving and receiving (materially or symbolically) in which the minoritised body is positioned as beneficiary.

Benevolent discrimination occurs within seemingly positive and well-meaning gestures. It belies a relational dynamic that rests on powered assumptions (constructions of white Western and non-white, non-Western difference). As such, the perspectives and actions manifested draw on inherited discriminatory legacies, or colonial residue, in the underlying assumptions about the beneficiary.

Further, the expectation of gratitude is pertinent. Unspoken tensions and internal conflict dwell within the spaces in which benefactor and recipient negotiate and interact. The beneficiary

knows not to overstep the bounds of the interaction – for instance by criticising the benefactor. Implicit understandings of underlying rules make this issue a difficult ground to tread. When kindness engenders expectations of gratitude, one cannot easily or comfortably demand a more appropriate gesture or insist on a particular subjectivity. In the interaction, a hegemonic, dominant gaze (benevolent subjectivity) constructs and bestows what is deemed necessary to help minoritised persons or groups. The benefactor, individual or collective, defines and controls not only subjectivity by way of the gaze, but also through the help provided.

Micro-discrimination and benevolent discrimination can perhaps be said to be two sides of the same coin. Benevolent discrimination can occur in the form of micro-discrimination, and vice versa. Further, there is a certain acquiescence or tolerance in the situations in which these occur, because both forms require a bodily/intimate encounter or space of familiarity in order to fully manifest, although it can happen randomly, whether that is for a few hours at a dinner party, working together at school or in supportive or other ordinary, everyday interactions.

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## Notes

1. I differentiate between structural and institutional discrimination. This distinction has been discussed in literature (Eckberg 1980; Henry *et al.* 1995; Pincus 1996; Hill 1989; Williams, RM 1988), yet they are often used synonymously.
2. In these examples, factors such as religion, race, gender and so on are complex parameters that contribute to racial discrimination. While religion is not necessarily always racialised, in these cases, religion and race overlap.

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